

Radio Remarks on Voluntary National Testing for Basic Education Skills

October 20, 1997

A new study released by the Department of Education today confirms what most of us knew instinctively already: Students, especially low income students, who challenge themselves with rigorous math and science courses in high school are much more likely to go on to college.

I've worked hard to make college affordable for all Americans. Our increased Pell grants and work-study positions, the new HOPE scholarship tax credits for the first 2 years of college, and other tax credits in education IRA's for the remaining years, graduate school, and other training, all these will truly open the doors of college to all who are willing to work for it.

We've addressed the economic barriers. Now we have to tackle the academic ones. While the studies show that taking algebra in middle school was essential to preparing for advanced math and science classes, just 25 percent of our eighth graders took algebra in 1996. We must do better. That's why I call upon all Americans to support our voluntary national tests for fourth-grade reading and eighth-grade math, to ensure that all our children meet the high standards of academic excellence they'll need to succeed in tomorrow's world. Our math test will make sure our children master algebra and prepare for math and science courses that lead to college.

I call upon Congress to end the delays. Our children are counting on us.

NOTE: This address was recorded at 9:43 a.m. on October 17 in Room 2233 at the Sheraton Hotel in Buenos Aires, Argentina, for later domestic broadcast, and it was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on October 20.

Remarks on the America Reads Initiative

October 21, 1997

Thank you very much. Secretary Riley, Dr. Corrigan, Senator Kennedy, Senator Specter, Congressmen Etheridge and Miller and Hoyer. And I thank the Members of Con-

gress not here in both parties who support this program.

Thank you, Eric Castillo, for what you do and for representing a new generation of American college students, I believe among the most idealistic and community service-oriented young people we have ever had in the colleges and universities of this country—and a rebuke to the superficial and downright wrong characterizations of Generation X as not caring about the future of this country. And I thank you for that.

And thank you, Victoria, for reading the book with me and making me look good. *[Laughter]* You did an excellent job. Her mother is here. I'd like to ask her mother to stand. Thank you very much for coming. *[Applause]* And they did a great job. Thank you. I thank all the other young students and all the other college students who are here, and a special word of thanks to all the college and university presidents who have joined us today.

We have just seen a concrete and, I thought, very moving example of the difference reading can make in the lives of our children. We also ought to remember the difference that this can make in the future of our country as we move into a new century and a very different time.

In the last 5 years, together we have done a lot to prepare our country for the 21st century: a new economic policy that works, a new crime policy that works, a new welfare reform policy that works, expanding health care coverage to our children, improving the environment, now opening the doors of college to all who are willing to work for it. But to fundamentally succeed in having an America where opportunity is open to everyone who will work for it and where everyone can be a part of a thriving American community, we must give all our children the world's best education.

By the year 2000, we should succeed in seeing that every 8-year-old can read independently, that every 12-year-old can log onto the Internet, that every 18-year-old can go on to college, and that every adult in our country can continue to learn for a lifetime.

We have made historic progress toward these goals. Last summer's balanced budget contained the biggest increased investment

in education since 1965, the biggest increase in access to higher education since the GI bill 50 years ago. It will go a long way toward funding our mission to connect every classroom and library to the Internet by the year 2000. But all of this progress will be limited if our children do not first master the basics. The next major step is to make sure every 8-year-old can do what Secretary Riley's grandchild and Victoria can do—they can say, "I can read this book all by myself."

We know that children who don't read well by the end of the third grade are more likely to drop out of school and far less likely to realize their full potential. We know that children who receive the help they need are much more likely to succeed in school and in life.

Today, 40 percent of our Nation's 8-year-olds are not reading as well as they should. There are many reasons for this. We come from many different places, and we have more and more young children whose first language is not even English. But none of these reasons is an excuse for our inaction, particularly when we see that action can produce the kind of results that Victoria showed us today.

That is one of the reasons that I have supported high national standards for reading and national examinations to make sure our children are reaching those standards. And that is the main reason we have launched America Reads. Over a year ago, it began with a simple idea, that a well-trained, coordinated army of a million volunteers could be rallied to teach our children. I called on every sector of society to help us mobilize this citizen army, specifically challenging colleges and universities to use their new work-study slots to train tutors. There are 300,000 of those new slots that have been approved by our Congress in the last 2 years. And to help them do it, we waived the requirement that colleges pay 25 percent of work-study wages.

Our college and university presidents and our college students have more than risen to meet this challenge. Last December, 21 college presidents, led by President Corrigan, pledged to start these programs for their students and urge others to do the same. You heard President Corrigan say that

now almost 800 colleges and universities have joined America Reads. These voluntary commitments will reach hundreds of thousands of children and help them to reach their dreams. And I might say that a lot of the colleges and universities are finding that they have more people who want to participate than they have work-study slots. They even have people who want to participate who aren't eligible for work-study and just want to do it because they think it's the right thing to do.

At Yale, 300 students applied for 60 work-study slots. At the University of Michigan, 400 applied for 84 slots. At Miami Dade Community College, our Nation's largest community college, more than 150 tutors have been trained and already are helping students throughout your hometown. In Boston, an energetic group appropriately called Jump Start teamed up with several local colleges to connect work-study students to children who need help. These are just a few examples.

I want to join Secretary Riley and thank my longtime friend Carol Rasco for the outstanding leadership she has given this program. I thank the Department of Education. But most of all, I thank the young people of this country who are responding to the challenge.

And I might say also, as we all know, the challenge is not wholly confined to our colleges and universities. I just received the quarterly report of the church that Hillary and I attend here in Washington. They have 45 members of the church involved in America Reads. This idea is catching fire in America. The interest is there, the concern is there, the commitment is there to meet our goal.

That's why it is so important for Congress to fund America Reads, as President Corrigan said. It was agreed as part of our balanced budget agreement. The proposal will pay for 25,000 reading specialists and coordinators to coordinate the tutor training and support we need to enlist, train, and put into action the entire army of America Reads volunteers to serve every child in America, like Victoria and the others who are here, who are out there waiting to meet a volunteer.

Also, because parents are our children's first and most important teachers, the proposal includes challenge grants to help parents do more to teach their children to read. I think that is critically important, and that is a part of the program that is in the budget. These approaches are the best things we know to do to teach our kids to read. They're already working in places like Simpson County, Kentucky, where AmeriCorps members help students jump an average of 3 grade levels in 8 months; working in Reading, Ohio, where trained parent volunteers are helping their kindergarten-aged children make 3 times the progress of children who don't get the extra help; working in my home State of Arkansas, where the Home Institution Program for Preschool Youngsters, HIPPPY, brings parents into their children's learning process with stunning results; working here in the District of Columbia, where this February we launched DC Reads to bring together literacy programs and local volunteer reading tutors. With America Reads, it can work all over the country for every child who needs it.

This reflects the commitment, I might add, that thousands of Americans made at the Presidents' Summit on Service in Philadelphia a few months ago, to marshal the resources of every part of our society to help our children get a good education, get basic health care, do it in a safe environment with adult mentors, and with a chance for all children themselves to serve.

We've made a lot of progress since the summit on all fronts. Especially, I want to note that we've increased the number of AmeriCorps scholarships, recognized high school service, encouraged private businesses to help parents move from welfare to work. But we have to give all children the chance to learn and all Americans the chance to serve. The great thing about America Reads is it serves two of the goals of the summit: It gives children a good education, and it gives young people the chance to serve.

It would be a shame, with all the children out there who still need help learning to read and who want to get it, with all the parents who are yearning to do the best job they can as parents raising their children, with all the idealistic students and other American citi-

zens who want to be a part of this program—it would be a shame if we did not reach the full goal of America Reads. We have to have a bipartisan commitment to education that transcends politics. We have to have a follow-through on the bipartisan commitment to fund America Reads to its full potential.

The renowned African-American educator Mary McLeod Bethune once said, "The whole world opened up to me when I learned to read." We read "The Carrot Seed" today. Instead of the carrot, think about Victoria. Think about a million Victorias. Think about millions and millions more. We are the planters of the seed. We have to first plant the seed, and then we have to tell the doubters it will grow.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:43 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Robert A. Corrigan, president, San Francisco State University; Eric Castillo, tutor, America Reads Foundation; Victoria Adeniji, second-grade student tutored in the America Reads program, and her mother, Felicia; and Carol H. Rasco, Director, America Reads Foundation.

Remarks to the Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues

October 21, 1997

Thank you, Eleanor, for that introduction. We've been friends a long time and, frankly, I had forgotten that I had done some of those things. [*Laughter*] Thank you, Nancy Johnson, Madam Secretary. Thank you, First Lady, for now spending more than half your life at least acquainted with me in some form or fashion—[*laughter*—almost half of it married.

I congratulate the members of the caucus on 20 years of leadership. I thank Women's Policy Inc. for hosting this event, and I am delighted to be here, not only with the Secretary of State but also with Audrey Haines, the Director of the White House Office for Women's Initiatives and Outreach, and several other outstanding senior officials of the White House.

I, too, want to pay tribute to Margaret Heckler and Elizabeth Holtzman for their vision in creating this office, for the leadership